

Beyond Compliance: Fire Drills and Fire Safety Training That Motivate Staff and the People They Serve

“We find that the [fire safety] practices were geared to meet regulatory requirements rather than to meeting the actual needs of the residents who were extraordinarily vulnerable to the risk of death in a structure fire.”

—Grand Jury Report

Two hours before dawn, a tiny flame smoldered inside a porch trash bin. Smoke and flames spread quickly from the trash bin to the adjacent wall of the bedroom wing where nine residents with developmental and physical disabilities slept. The fire engulfed the porch roof, then spread to the building roof. Heat detectors set off the alarm.

The two staff members on duty that night worked to evacuate the residents by the procedure established during many fire drills--exiting toward the building's front entrance. This practice took residents right past a closer exit near the bedrooms which was protected by double fire doors which closed automatically when the alarm system activated.

Following normal fire drill practice, residents were brought to a mud room near the front entrance to be evacuated to the outside. But when a resident fell or sat on the pavement, both staff members had to attend to that resident.

Left alone, three other residents did exactly what they had always done at the end of fire drills—they went back inside.

They ultimately perished, along with a fourth resident who was found in the living room.

The Grand Jury Report on that fire in Wells, NY found that the residence had *more* fire safety features than many such homes in the state, and met or exceeded all residential requirements. But those features and requirements did not meet the full requirements of protecting residents.

“It became habitual to move residents the longer distance... and consequently through the closed fire doors, defeating the benefit of this fire safety feature.”

–Grand Jury Report

The Challenge: Frequent Practice for an Infrequent Event

A fire perfectly meets the criteria of a high priority: both important and urgent. A fire *drill* meets only one of these. In the midst of daily crises it is easy to see exit practice as a required nuisance, especially if the agency has not yet experienced a real fire. The dangers of inadequate fire safety training, planning, and practice only become clear after a fire occurs.

At the Wells residence, the Grand Jury found, normal practice during fire drills was to exit by the front entrance because it was the most convenient place to gather residents. While the official fire evacuation plan provided that the residents be taken to a designated safe area well away from the building, during fire drill practice the evacuation normally stopped short of that area. Fire drills through the alternate exit near the bedrooms were “infrequent at best.”

It also found that fire drills conducted on the overnight shift were conducted either by simulation, at pre-arranged times of the night and without a full evacuation, or after 5 a.m., when additional staff arrived and could assist the two overnight workers in the evacuation. As a result the most critical questions of home escape were not addressed: Can everyone get out, under real conditions?

“The normal situation had staff being alerted in advance to the drill. The natural result was residents being prepared by the staff in advance of evacuation, thus creating circumstances which would not accurately reflect the actual difficulties which would occur in a real fire.”

– Grand Jury Report

Challenges to Effective Fire Safety Training

- **Exit drill overkill.**

Since it's so important to practice exit drills, it might seem as though more must be better. Some agencies hold fire drills monthly even where State regulations require only 2 drills per shift annually. But more is not necessarily better. Such repetition can lead to resistance, complaisance, and dangerously poor habits, such as going right back inside immediately after evacuating the building when the alarm sounds.

When caregivers enforce drills but haven't internalized the reasons for this practice, they may fail to communicate that it's important to respond when the alarm sounds, to get outside, and *stay out* until told that it is safe to return.

- **False sense of security** from the completion of routine fire drills.

Even if a drill isn't scheduled, people usually get some heads-up that one is about to occur—like seeing you and your staff in the hallway with walkie talkies. Artificial "readiness" around rote fire drills can make it harder to recognize the problems that are likely to arise when something unexpected happens, such as mobility challenges. Because they have met a quota of fire drills, people *believe* they have done a good job and everyone is now safe.

- **Inadequate exit planning process.**

The Wells fire tragically demonstrated the potential dangers of incomplete planning, or practice. Fire safety and fire survival is complicated, as everyone knows who has actually gone through the process of creating

and practicing a home fire drill. Realistic practice can reveal dangerous flaws in an imagined escape plan given the many factors to be considered:

- How will each person get out if a fire occurred?
- Does everyone know how to respond?
- What physical barriers might prevent escape?
- What physical and mental limitations of each individual might hinder escape?
- What would be the best route out, for fires in a variety of possible locations?
- “What if?” is a question that must be continually asked, and which is not readily answered. One size simply doesn’t fit all.

Resistance to exit drills

For people who haven’t been motivated, or internalized a different set of actions, the alarm itself can be a “setting event” for resistant behavior. And it’s not only individuals with developmental disabilities who can have resistance. Staff may feel “Here we go again!” and their aspect may communicate that fire drill practice is bothersome and not really important.

When thought and action are concentrated on meeting legal requirements—on compliance—there may be little understanding of *why* these things are necessary and desirable. People who are never asked to reflect on the need for meaningful practice may meet only the letter of the law, e.g. performing fire drills in the same way each time, rather than practicing what to do when something unforeseen—a fire—actually happens.

Motivating Staff and the People They Serve

Meaningful training is built on models proven to actually change behavior, including the critical factor of motivation. The biggest challenge in fire safety training, then, is how to bring the training to life and help people internalize the importance of their exit drills and overall attitude toward fire safety:

- **Don't just plan for a drill, plan for a fire.** If the need to exit was truly unexpected and immediate, what would happen? What would *need* to happen? What if a window had to become the exit point? What are the challenges of people with mobility issues, and how will they be handled? Who will do that? Is "sheltering in place" the best option for some individuals, and are there adequate facilities for that?
- **Walk the talk.** Be sure that you not only *say* "this is important" but *demonstrate* this in your aspect, attitude and action. Convey that everyone has a role. Individuals with developmental disabilities need to understand that *their* role in exiting is important. Consider a buddy system, for those individuals who are able to help each other.
- **Emphasize that everyone has a role to play in a drill.** In a real fire no one would just stand and observe. During a drill, everyone—CEO, direct support staff, individuals—should be as involved as they really would be in a fire.

Playing a role, and deciding which individuals can play which roles, is also empowering for staff and contributes to their motivation. Consider who calls the 'all clear' after drills, who holds the door, who is able to assist with walkers or wheelchairs. During drills use the PA system to calm, give instructions, and remind people of their exit plan.

- **Give those who have been resistive a role to play during drills.** At one agency an individual who had been resistive was made a “fire marshal” and given a stopwatch to time how quickly the drill was completed correctly. Once he was put in charge of drills he had a sense of purpose and became excited about the process.
- **Consider bringing in a new face for fire safety training.** In-house training can be less engaging simply because of familiarity. One agency staff member summed it up: “They see us every day. It’s same old, same old.”

The person providing the training needs both an understanding of and a strong commitment to fire safety, with the motivation and enthusiasm needed to engage an audience. The Grand Jury Report on the Wells fire noted that fire safety at that facility and others had typically been handled by employees who “have little training in fire safety and cannot in any sense be considered professionals in the field.”

What to Look for in Effective Fire Safety Training

To engage the audience enough to motivate them, fire safety training should be:

- **In-person**, able to be customized to your agency and answer the questions and concerns brought up by your own staff and the individuals they serve.
- **Interactive** rather than a lecture. People are engaged when they see that someone is answering their questions, rather than just telling them what they “should do.”

In our experience people with developmental disabilities have many questions about fire safety, and their questions are very specific and pertinent to their individual situations. They ask plenty of those “What if?” questions so critical to effective exit planning. In other words, their questions address the true complexity of fire survival skills. The person providing fire safety training must have the ability to listen carefully to questions and use them to individualize the training.

- **Concrete and relevant.** Everyone involved needs to understand *why* we practice exiting, not just that we “have to.”
- Focused on **practical skills** that will help individuals be safer, such as kitchen safety and identifying fire and poison hazards.

“The biggest change [since the Prevention 1st training] has been that most people independently exit the building during fire drills and go straight to the meeting spot.”

– Hillside Family of Agencies

“Audience participation was good. I’ve been to many presentations where the instructor talks and expects everyone to listen. By having audience engagement people were more focused and paid attention better.”

–Arc of Monroe

“The Prevention 1st training involved live discussion, a storybook, and the group (or individual) use of the web-based games. This is a great combination for our students! The videos and web based activities allowed students to be interactive with the material, which makes this adaptable to various learning styles.

–Holy Childhood

“Flexibility, and the ability to ‘riff’ with the audience is key to [Presentation 1st trainer Bob Crandall’s] success. Bob can answer questions, bring a different background and a real-ness to this. It’s not the same old, same old. It’s a new face.” –Epilepsy-Pralid, Inc.

The Prevention 1st Advantage

Since 2006, Prevention 1st has advocated for, developed, and delivered effective fire safety education for people diagnosed with developmental disabilities. Our trainers are continually requested to deliver our training to agencies, and return for regular refresher sessions.

Prevention 1st trainers listen, explain why, and respond to issues presented by the audience. Our training strategies give individuals real experience with practical skills they need to stay safe. They are involved in role plays, guided imagery, and sharing of experiences that make the abstract concept of safety become real.

Find out more about Prevention 1st training workshops at <http://www.prevention1st.org/safety-training-for-special-needs.html> or call (585) 383-6505.

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